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
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Chapter One

Beethoven's Game of Cat and Mouse

Towards the end of his life Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny recounted a story that appeared in Cocks's *London Musical Miscellany* on 2 August 1852:

His [Beethoven's] improvisation was most brilliant and striking. In whatever company he might chance to be, he knew how to produce such an effect upon every hearer that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break out into loud sobs; for there was something wonderful in his expression in addition to the beauty and originality of his ideas and his spirited style of rendering them. After ending an improvisation of this kind he would burst into loud laughter and banter his hearers on the emotion he had caused in them. 'You are fools!' he would say. Sometimes he would feel himself insulted by these indications of sympathy. 'Who can live among such spoiled children?' he would cry.¹

This story is told in connection with the King of Prussia, who had attended such an improvisation and offered Beethoven an invitation there and then. Beethoven refused, he told Czerny, because of this feeling of being insulted by his audience's emotion.

The picture is vivid and disturbing since we would normally suppose that to hear Beethoven improvising would indeed be a moving experience. If Liszt could reduce his audience to tears playing the 'Moonlight' Sonata in a darkened room, how much more affecting would be the presence of Beethoven himself hunched over the lower end of the keyboard, laying out solemn chords perhaps like the slow movement of the 'Appassionata', throwing in surprise sforzandos and abrupt changes of key and keeping the emotional tension high. For their vulnerability his audience is then shouted at. 'You fools!' he cries, perhaps slamming down the lid.

This is no doubt an illustration of Beethoven's well-known lack of social graces; only the desire to be drawn again into the mystical world that his music magically suggested would induce members of Viennese or Prussian society to

invite him back and run the risk of being insulted again. But it should not be ascribed simply to bad manners: it is also an illustration of Beethoven's regard for his audiences not only when he was improvising but in his finished compositions too. Mozart used to complain, with good reason, if his audiences were boorish or noisy while he was playing. Beethoven's complaint was the opposite: he scorned his listeners for being so attentive and so moved. What sense are we to make of that?

It may be assumed that composers normally aspire to please, gratify, move or lead their listeners. Some like to baffle, some like to offend. Beethoven can be excused of wishing to offend his audience, but the other aspirations can be ascribed to him easily enough. In addition he had the rarer desire, not widely acknowledged, to tease and deceive us, an impulse that betrays a seriously disturbing attitude that will make many of his admirers uncomfortable.

Much scholarship has been devoted to the problem of understanding Beethoven's mind, often with the assumption that an assiduous reading of the notes will reveal the processes that led to the finished masterpieces. By good fortune we have an enormous body of sketches that should, on the face of it, afford a glimpse of the master at his desk, crafting polished wood from the rough timber of his first ideas. Beethoven himself clearly valued the sketchbooks since he carted them from one apartment to another even when they related to works that had long been performed and published. But although sketches tell us what earlier forms the music took, they never reveal the reason why one version was replaced by another. Beethoven was not obliging enough to scribble 'too short', 'too complicated' or 'too dull' in the margin, and some of his early ideas might strike the innocent reader as equally good as their replacements, if not better.

Analysis, similarly, can ultimately only tell us what's there, in the music, not why it's there, a fact that is now more widely acknowledged in the face of determined but vain attempts to show that everything in Beethoven is connected in some profoundly organic way. At one point the composer's integrity had to be shown to reside in the wholeness and rationality of the music, without untidy disclosures that interfered with the picture of interpretative certainty. Whereas early reactions to the late quartets had been a splutter of incomprehension (Tchaikovsky described them as chaos²), the twentieth century has produced a stream of guides, analyses and interpretations claiming that these works, though difficult, are not meaningless or unfathomable. No critic or scholar would admit to not comprehending them, and they are played everywhere. Psychoanalysis and the full apparatus of modern scholarship, we are told, have laid bare the essence of such problematic music, and perhaps it is true that for many people the experience of listening to late Beethoven is indeed an experience of imagined comprehension. Patient work by performers and scholars has revealed a great deal, but we can no longer claim, with Alfred Einstein, that 'there is not—even in the last works of Beethoven—a single movement, a single measure, that

does not rest on the strictest, immanent musical logic, and that even in the most minute detail would call for extra-musical justification'.³

Such arrogance used to be more common than it is now, happily, and we should acknowledge that Einstein was here trying to deflect the notion that there might be dramatic or narrative impulses at work in Beethoven's music. Even so, he clearly believed that there is such a thing as musical logic, and that one set of notes implies, or even necessitates, another set of notes. Calling it 'immanent' logic is merely a defence against the charge that the logic cannot always be demonstrated.

Now it is of course true that much of Beethoven's music is easily explained in terms of customary procedures. Recapitulations often happen according to expectation; most instrumental pieces modulate within a page or two to the dominant; most pieces end in the key they start in. Symphonies usually have four movements, concertos have cadenzas, and so on. We know from our familiarity with classical style when not to be surprised by regular events in Beethoven's music. But if it were all truly logical it would instantly lose its interest, since we could predict everything before it happened and by applying the rules compose another dozen Beethoven symphonies, sonatas and quartets of our own.

Despite the widespread belief, still held in many quarters, that the classical virtues of order, logic, unity and organic growth are the mainsprings of Beethoven's genius, there seems to me to be an equal place in his work allotted to precisely the opposite, to elements that are disorderly, illogical, disunified, inorganic, anticlassical, disruptive, and so on. Beethoven's range is much wider than many have realised. And he can switch instantly from one extreme to the other. He can mix the good, the bad and the ugly within a single bar. Reason and unreason jostle side by side. This would be more tolerable if we could easily tell which was which, but the disturbing thing is that it is never clear. Listening to Beethoven can be a grotesque guessing game because just when you think you have the measure of his mind, he pulls the rug from under, he slips like a genie through your fingers, he slams down the lid of the piano.

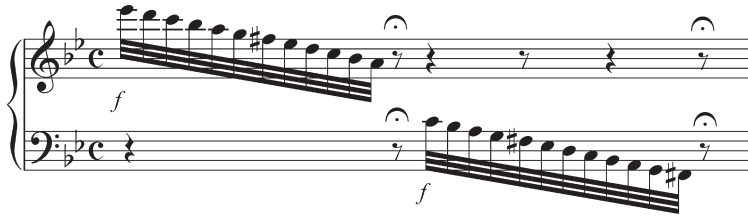
Some of these extremes can be illustrated. For example, it is hard to comprehend the contrast between the *Missa solennis* and the little A Major Bagatelle, op. 119 no. 10, which lasts about eleven seconds (or six seconds if you omit the repeat). How can these be the product of the same mind and the same years? How are we to admire the broad discursiveness of some of the larger middle-period works and then accept the fierce concentration of the first movement of the F Minor String Quartet, op. 95? These abrupt contrasts were clearly an expression of his nature. Some movements are relentlessly unified by thematic and other means; elsewhere his goal is clearly the sharpest possible disunity both within and between movements. The first two movements of the 'Moonlight' Sonata offer an example, and the two movements of the last piano sonata, op. 111, are deliberately as different in mood, key, pace and character as could reasonably be contrived, with virtually nothing in common between them. Yet a performance of one

movement without the other would be roundly condemned as betraying the wholeness of Beethoven's plan. But who can tell what that wholeness is?

The clearest illustration of Beethoven's capacity to baffle us is the *Phantasie* for piano, op. 77, which deserves a closer examination if only because it is very little known and scarcely ever played. Most writers on Beethoven give it no more than a passing nod. It presents a number of problems that admit no easy explanation; or rather, it presents a single considerable problem that can only be solved if we jettison a number of cherished views about criticism, analysis and musical response. It is a short piece that might be thought innocuous enough to be left in the general obscurity in which it lies, but it has the potential to derail the whole apparatus of criticism. Of course it would be typical of Beethoven to undermine many of our long-established notions with a piece such as this, and that is what I believe it does.

The *Phantasie* was composed in 1809. On 22 December 1808 Beethoven gave the famous concert that included the first performances of the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the Fourth Piano Concerto, various vocal pieces and the Choral Fantasia, op. 80. He also played a 'Phantasie' for piano alone, which may or may not bear any relation to the *Phantasie* published as op. 77. Most probably it was improvised, as we know that he improvised the opening cadenza of the Choral Fantasia. This cadenza was written down in 1809, and the *Phantasie* was probably composed at the same time, along with the Fifth Piano Concerto and the two piano sonatas op. 78 and op. 79. It was published in 1810. By any standards it is a most extraordinary composition. Since C. P. E. Bach the title 'fantasia' had embraced all kinds of freely composed pieces that belonged to no recognised category of composition; Mozart's and Schubert's fantasies can be, structurally, very loose. But the *Phantasie*, op. 77 is, even within this tradition, the most violently disconcerting of any. It begins in G minor and ends in B major; in between it passes through D minor, A \flat major and many other unrelated keys. It has no thematic skeleton, the tempo fluctuates wildly. Pauses, cadenzas, flourishes and violent changes of dynamic and direction abound. Only two clear formal elements can be isolated: one is the descending (and sometimes ascending) scale, like a harp glissando, that is heard at the beginning, the end and elsewhere in between (see ex. 1.1). The other is the set of variations in B major that begins at bar 157 and which makes the composition inconsistently inconsistent by introducing the semblance of musical order into what has begun as a totally disorderly piece.

The *Phantasie* has turned out to be one of Beethoven's least-known compositions, but by no stretch of the imagination can it be called dull or commonplace. It has been neglected by critics, scholars and pianists probably for the very reason that it is so baffling, for there are doubtless as many responses to this piece as there are listeners. The questions it poses are, among others, the following: Why does it begin, after the scale, with a cadence rather than a theme? Why is that cadence immediately repeated a tone lower? Why does the D \flat section occur where it does (bar 6)? Why should Beethoven introduce a banal little folkish



Example 1.1

melody at bar 15 and abandon it with such violence at the switch to D minor (bar 37)? Why does the same D minor section move abruptly into an A, Adagio, of all things, which in turn fails to establish any but the most transitory existence? Why does the B minor 'più presto' section (bar 102) introduce a quasi-fugal texture? And why, ultimately, should all this scrambling and switching conclude with a serene but not particularly profound (by Beethoven's standards) set of variations in, of all keys, B major?

What can we say? We can turn away baffled and even repelled, as perhaps many have. Or we can follow Czerny, as most critics do, in describing it as an example of Beethoven's art of improvisation. Czerny is good authority, of course, but one should pause for a moment to ask why Beethoven should improvise in a style so much more disorderly than usual. He was certainly capable of improvising without abrupt shifts of tempo and material, and could surely improvise whole movements in the same key and tempo if he wished. The implication of Czerny's comment is that Beethoven was a highly undisciplined improviser, which is hard to believe.

Alternatively one may see the piece as the enactment of a drama. Wilhelm de Lenz, who lived a good deal closer to Beethoven's age than we do, described the *Phantasie* as some kind of medieval legend that Beethoven was relating, incident by incident, although he was no more specific than that.⁴ Even Tovey, in a 1923 programme note, attached descriptive significance to the opening phrases:⁵ the scales, he says, are a 'note of interrogation' and the adagio cadence that follows is 'an expression of resigned hopelessness'. To the piece's extraordinary structure he shows no reaction save to say that the B minor 'più presto' section leads somewhere, that is to say into the B major variations, unlike all the preceding passages, 'all these questions and efforts', as he calls them.

Paul Bekker, who is generally sound on Beethoven's improvisatory pieces, has another poetic interpretation (written in 1912):⁶ 'Has the Soul found its balance and rest?' he asks. No, is the answer. But Bekker also strikes a more modern note, claiming to demonstrate the unity of the *Phantasie* on the basis of its 'one-tone motif' from which everything is organically developed.

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